Bridging the Gap:
George Washington's Impact on Civil Authority over the Military

Senior Project

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Abstract

Prior to the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War, there existed an antiarmy sentiment among a majority of American colonists. This was evident with the selection of George Washington as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, as his peers viewed him as a politician, not a soldier. Despite this characterization, Washington worked tirelessly to ensure the Continental Army gained and maintained the trust of the American people, with many of his personal decisions directly influencing the actions and "honor" of the Continental Army. These actions taken by Washington not only convinced colonists to trust the army, but also ensured that overall military control rested in the hands of the elected, civilian government, a practice that is still in effect today.

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Hostilities between the British Army and American colonists erupted in April 1775 at Lexington, Massachusetts with an armed conflict between British regulars and American militiamen. Months after this confrontation, the delegates of the Continental Congress decided to elect a commander-in-chief for the American colonists. There were many potential candidates for this post, such as John Hancock or Charles Lee, but the Continental Congress unanimously selected George Washington as the Commander-in-Chief of the nonexistent Continental Army. Washington was selected for multiple reasons, he had more military experience than most men in Colonial America, due to his service within the Virginia Regiment with the rank of commander. As a native Virginian, Washington's appointment as Commander-in-Chief would almost certainly secure the participation of Virginia, the wealthiest and most populous colony, in conflict against Britain, while placing a Southern commander over an army composed of mainly New Englanders.[1] This would foster a sense of unity among the colonies, in Congress's mind, by getting Southern colonists invested in struggles based mainly in Massachusetts. George Washington also volunteered to accept the post of Commander-in-Chief without a salary, only asking for reimbursement of any expenses brought upon by the war with the British. These aspects of Washington's command, although important, did not have a lasting impact on the United States military. However, the relationship that Washington cultivated with the Continental Congress, beginning with his appointment as Commander-in-Chief, created a military tradition of deference to civic authority. Until

[1] James MacDonald, "Appointment as Commander in Chief," in *The Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington,* edited by James P. Ambuske. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 2012-. https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/appointment-as-commander-in-chief/.

his resignation on December 23, 1783, George Washington maintained a deferential role to the Continental/Confederation Congress, always recognizing himself as a servant of the delegates while sending them information and requests on approvals for military action. The actions taken by George Washington as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army when interacting with Congress set the precedent for the relationship between the United States Congress and military leadership.

In the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, an antiarmy sentiment had pervaded the British colonies of North America. During the 17th-century, radical English Whig ideology made its way to the British colonies of North America, where the well-educated rapidly absorbed and adopted these ideals.[2] This would lead the American colonists to form militias within their communities, with hopes that these small, community-based forces would be able to protect the liberties of the colonists. After the Seven Years War, Great Britain had accumulated a substantial debt in defeated its enemies, and turned to its colonies to help repay these debts. Different acts, such as the Townsend Duties or the Stamp Act, were passed to raise revenue so Britain would not have to take on more debt to pay for the British soldiers stationed in North America. While the colonists were not fond of the new taxes, they were extremely unhappy at having to quarter, or provide for, the British soldiers. Colonists were forced to absorb the costs of supporting these troops, an indirect tax, while also paying direct taxes on goods due to acts passed by Parliament in London.[3] Competition between colonists and off-duty redcoats for jobs also led to conflict, with some protests ending in violence, such as the Boston Massacre, where panicked British soldiers fired into a group of Bostonians after

[2] James K. Martin and Mark E. Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2006), 14.
[3] Ibid, 21.

they had begun pelting them with snowballs and stones. It was this combination of Whig ideology, indirect taxation, and competition that led to violence between colonists and British soldiers. These events led to the antiarmy sentiment in British North American colonies to become even stronger, making it hard for anyone to promote using a large, standing army to fight Great Britain when the Americans declared independence. However, through his actions of obedience to Congress and acknowledgement of the pressures of the military on the American public, George Washington was able to successfully compose and lead the Continental Army in a land that despised armies.

Before his appointment as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, George Washington was a delegate to the Continental Congress from Virginia. His experience in the Continental Congress resulted in Washington having an intimate knowledge of how the institution worked. It was also this experience that allowed Washington to understand that he was a servant to all of the 56 delegates within the Continental Congress and would only exercise power that was allotted him by that body.[4] Before undertaking any large-scale military action, Washington would initially be required to consult a "Council of War," a measure enacted by Congress to democratize military command while also ensuring that too much power did not fall into the hands of one military commander.[5] Washington complied with the requests of Congress in order to ensure that he was not viewed as an all-powerful figure, much like the image their former king, George III of Great Britain, portrayed over the British military. Such examples of Washington's compliance with Congressional wishes are evident in the early battles in Boston and New York City. Upon his arrival to Boston, Washington's troops had already trapped 8,000

[4] Brian L. Beirne, "George vs. George vs. George: Commander-in-Chief Power," *Yale Law & Policy Review*, Volume 26, No. 1 (Fall 2007), 281.
[5] Ibid, 282.

British soldiers in the city and their only escape would be possible via ship. After concocting a plan to attack the trapped soldiers, Washington convened the Council of War in order to ask permission to attack Boston by using flat-bottom boats. Although Washington realized that a battle in Boston would likely raze the city, he believed that it would be the best course of action in order to prevent the British from acquiring reinforcements that could later be used to crush the Continental Army. The members of the Council of War disagreed with Washington's assessment, however, and deemed an attack on Boston as too risky and voted down Washington's request to attack.[6] Washington made four more requests to attack Boston were made between March 1775 and March 1776, and each request was declined until the British finally evacuated Boston on March 17, 1776.[7] Washington expressed his exasperation with a committee-based war effort in letters to his brother, John, but still continued to abide by the decisions of Congress and the Council of War.

This new authority given to George Washington by the Continental Congress was not completely without controversy. Not only did the delegates of the Continental and later Confederation Congress have reservations about delegating military power to military leaders, but people at-large also felt similar inhibitions. The existence of the position of Commander-in-Chief stemmed from the British tradition, in which the British monarch had complete oversight and control of the military. Congressional delegates made their distaste of such a powerful official in *The Declaration of Independence*, attacking the use of the military as a superior force to any civil institutions by British

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[6] Beirne, "George vs. George vs. George," 282.
[7] Ibid, 283.

kings, specifically George III.[8] Delegates went to even further lengths to insure the prevention of a George III-style military leader. In the Articles of Confederation, the United States' first governing document, Congress had the exclusive power to appoint high-ranking officers in the Continental Army, the sole authority on rules for the military, and directly controlled the objectives of military actions, as there was no executive branch established by the articles.[9] The civic leaders of the new state held onto this power, until the reality of war settled in, and they delegated George Washington greater autonomy over military decisions. Congress felt confident enough in Washington to allow him this greater control due to his actions early on as Commander-in-Chief. While he could have styled himself as a Caesar-like figure who took credit for every victory or required himself to be the center of attention in every action taken by the army, Washington adhered to the "civil constitution."[10] By acting in a more humble manner, he proved himself worthy of the trust of Congress, who would not have to worry about a pompous general with troops taking control after they had declared independence from a pompous king and his army.[11]

Another example of Washington's commitment to abiding by the decisions of Congress is his defense of New York City in the second year of the Revolutionary War. After the British evacuation of Boston, both Congressional and military leadership knew that New York City would eventually become the target of a British assault. Despite this knowledge, Washington knew that the Continental Army would never be able to defend the city from the British. New York City is surrounded by water and the military with the

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[8] Beirne, "George vs. George vs. George," 275.
[9] Ibid, 276.
[10] Don Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 67.
[11] Ibid, 68.

more powerful navy had the greatest chance of either conquering or holding the city, and Great Britain had the most powerful navy in the world at that time. Even General Charles Lee, one of Washington's greatest critics, knew that "whoever commands the sea must command the town," showing that the British forces would likely occupy New York City due to the power of the British Navy.[12] Regardless of the American ability to hold New York City against the British, the head of the Congressional Board of War, John Adams, urged Washington to attempt a defense of New York City for symbolic reasons.[13] Washington complied with the request from Adams, and engaged in a disastrous defense of New York City that decimated his army, but kept the political leaders appeased. Notwithstanding the disastrous defeat at New York, Congressional delegates did not realize that "rule-by-committee" approach to war would not result in an American victory until December 1776. Washington's inspiring victory at Trenton, New Jersey in December 1776 also gave the Continental Congress the push it needed to ultimately give the Commander-in-Chief overarching authority in military matters concerning strategy and conscription.[14] Even now as the master of Continental troops and chief of military conduct, Washington still deferred to Congress in matters of military supplies and pay.

Although Washington now controlled the movements of the Continental Army, there were still occasions where he went against his better judgement and acted on the wishes of Congress. Washington understood that he did not have the authority to confiscate property and supplies from Americans without the approval of Congress, resulting in long waits for ammunition, clothing, and food for his troops. Besides the

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[12] Beirne, "George vs. George vs. George," 283.
[13] Ibid, 283.
[14] Ibid, 285.

ineffectiveness of Congress in acquiring and distributing these goods throughout their troops, their decisions on where the army should establish winter quarters also proved disastrous. In the winter of 1777, Washington wanted to quarter his troops in a large-sized town to ensure that the men were provided shelter and food to last them throughout the winter. The members of the Continental Congress, however, wanted Washington to move his troops to the hills of Valley Forge, close to York, where the Continental Congress had fled when General Howe's British troops marched into Philadelphia.[15] Washington, against his better judgement, moved his winter quarters to the hills of Valley Forge to make the Congressional delegates feel more secure. Even though Congress proved ineffective in their ability to supply the quartered army, Washington never overstepped his delegated authority. While his soldiers were insufficiently armed and starving, Washington did not commandeer supplies from the surrounding farmers even though he persistently wrote Congress for permission to begin taking supplies.[16] Congress also had issues finding money to pay the salaries of their enlisted soldiers and for supplies for their armies, and any paper money they printed was worthless when compared to British gold. Washington worked diligently to keep his men loyal to Congress and keep non-enlisted colonial farmers from supporting the British, all while obeying the wishes of Congress.[17]

Washington was not always successful in his efforts to placate suffering soldiers during the winter, but remained determined to keep his subordinates loyal to the civil authority of Congress. In the winter of 1780-81, the lack of supplies provided to the

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[15] Sharon A. Holt, "Why George Washington Let the Army Starve: Necessity Meets Democracy at Valley Forge," *Pennsylvania Legacies*, Volume 2, No. 1 (May 2002), 8.
[16] Ibid, 9.
[17] Beirne, "George vs. George vs. George," 288.

Continental Army by Congress resulted in a mutiny erupting in the New Jersey line.[18] Soldiers were forced to take desperate measures to survive, and combined with meager pay and insufficient rations, many were ready to march against different colonial legislatures, and force the legislators to pay them at gunpoint. The occurrence of the Pennsylvania Line rebellion mixed with the presence of alcohol, led to approximately 200 New Jersey soldiers marching towards the New Jersey legislature to force them to supply their lines. Colonel Israel Shreve, commander of the New Jersey forces at Pompton, sent a correspondence to Washington informing him of the mutinous soldiers. The letter reached Washington on January 21, 1781, mere days after the Pennsylvania Line mutiny had been settled. Washington ordered Colonel Shreve to contain the rebellion and force the insurgents into an unconditional surrender. He would even send a force of Continental soldiers under the command of General Robert Howe to help Colonel Shreve quell the mutiny. Washington even went as far as to order General Howe to "execute a few of the most active and most incendiary leaders," showing that the Commander-in-Chief would not tolerate any subversion by his troops.[19] In a letter to Congress, Washington asserted that "unless this dangerous spirit can be suppressed by force there is an end to all subordination in the Army, and indeed to the Army itself," showing that Washington would not allow a lawless disregard to the authority of colonial legislatures and his authority as Commander-in-Chief become a common practice within the Continental Army.[20] By ensuring the end of the New Jersey Line mutiny, Washington enforced his belief that the civil government is superior to the military leadership, and

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[18] Beirne, "George vs. George vs. George," 288.
[19] Michael Schellhammer, "Mutiny of the New Jersey Line," *Journal of the American Revolution*, March 19, 2014. https://allthingsliberty.com/2014/03/mutiny-of-the-new-jersey-line/.
[20] Ibid.

even when the government is not making decisions in a practical fashion, the military still needed to respect the authority of Congress instead of taking matters into its, the military's, own hands.

Mutiny by the Pennsylvania and New Jersey lines may have been actual acts of treason carried out by different soldiers, but there was also a mutinous plot that never came to fruition in the highest ranking officers of the Continental Army. Like the soldiers of the New Jersey mutiny, officers under the direct command of George Washington were growing angry at the failure of Congress to pay them. Congress owed many soldiers back pay along with pensions for their service throughout the duration of the American Revolutionary War, and yet Congress either did not have the funds to pay their soldiers, or any money they did possess and distribute was worthless. No guarantee on the distribution of pensions also exacerbated the officers' indignation, for many of them had left their businesses and farms to fight in the American Revolution, losing their sources of income and support. Without the money from back pay and pensions, soldiers facing the impending peace likely had no money left to make a life after serving in the Continental Army for years, with many officers losing all they had in serving their country. On March 15, 1783, the perturbed officers called a meeting in Newburgh, New York, the headquarters for George Washington, to discuss a petition that circulated through their camp calling on the army to refuse to lay down their arms when ordered to demobilize, so to pressure Congress for their money. Washington learned of the meeting, and while he sympathized with the officers, his dedication to maintaining the supremacy of the Confederation Congress over the military compelled him to bring the officers in line with their orders. He composed a nine-page speech to the deliver at the meeting,

showing his officers that while he knew of their struggles and sympathized with them, their methods in obtaining their demands were indecorous. In his speech, Washington warned his soldiers not to sully the reputation of the army, saying "this dreadful alternative, of either deserting our country in the extremest hour of her distress, or turning our army against it," saying that mutiny was tantamount to abandoning the new country in the fight against Britain, or in essence becoming like Britain themselves by turning their guns on the government of their new country.[21] If this new reputation of the military was tarnished, then all of the years and effort put forth by Washington and his officers to make the military more acceptable to antiarmy Americans would be for naught, and their newfound trust undermined.[22] By utilizing anti-British arguments previously made by his officers, Washington made his case against the petition to demobilize ever clearer. He showed both his loyalty to the officers in his service along with the Confederation Congress by convincing them to wait until Congress voted its approval of commutation, ensuring pay for all the members of the Continental Army.[23]

Another potential military power crisis emerged in May 1873, when General Henry Knox and Baron von Steuben formed the Society of the Cincinnati, named for an appointed Roman military leader who gave up power after the enemies of the Roman Republic had been overcome, in response to the Congressional dissolution of the

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[21] George Washington, "Newburgh Address: George Washington to Officers of the Army, March 15, 1783," George Washington's Mount Vernon. Mount Vernon's Ladies Association, 2012-, https://www.mountvernon.org/education/primary-sources-2/article/newburgh-address-george-washington-to-officers-of-the-army-march-15-1783/.

[22] Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 24-32.

[23] Ibid, 34.

Continental Army.[24] The purpose of this society was to preserve the connections between officers during the American Revolution, while also promoting the defense of liberty. Membership within the society was passed down to the veteran officer's oldest son and provided all members with a gold medal to wear. This structure was reminiscent of European-style orders of knights, a characteristics that unnerved many Americans, especially members of the Confederation Congress.[25] Washington was not a founding member of the Society of the Cincinnati, but he joined shortly after its establishment and was quickly made the President General of the society. Critics, such as Thomas Jefferson, saw the Society of the Cincinnati as a potential threat to the nascent Confederation Congress, as the order could possibly set up an American aristocracy made up of military families, a practice against the "egalitarian" beliefs of the Founding Fathers.[26] Washington engaged in discussions with Jefferson on ways to make the society more innocuous, in which Jefferson offered many different alterations. At the Society of the Cincinnati's general meeting in May 1784, Washington brought up these changes to the members, who eventually passed a number of measures, such as abolishing hereditary membership, the transfer of funds to administrations within state legislatures, and abolishing the national meetings.[27] Although this event was not wholly involved in the military, there members involved were former military officers and members of the Confederation Congress. Washington was so dedicated to recognizing the authority of Congress that he convinced former members of the Continental Congress to alter a

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[24] Patrick A. Pospisek, "Society of the Cincinnati," in *The Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington,* edited by James P. Ambuske. Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, 2012-. https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/society-of-the-cincinnati/.
[25] Pospisek, "Society of the Cincinnati." https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/society-of-the-cincinnati/..
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

private society to put Congressional members at ease, showing that he had no intentions of seizing power or giving the impression that he and the military wanted to seize power.

After the end of the American Revolutionary War on September 3, 1783, Washington no longer had a reason to remain the Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. On December 23, 1783, George Washington made a speech before the Confederation Congress, in which he resigned his commission as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, and from the military altogether. In his speech, Washington said he was to "surrender into their hands the trust committed to me," showing that he was giving back to Congress the power and authority they had given him to run the military as he saw fit.[28] This represented Washington's belief that the civil authority of the new United States, the Confederation Congress, was superior to any other government body and he could not hold onto power that the Articles of Confederation gave Congress. The popularity and influence held by Washington at the end of the American Revolution was unlike that of any other American figure, so much so that Washington may have been able to take power in the new country over the Confederation Congress. However, in a show of complete loyalty and deference, Washington resigned his post as Commander-in-Chief to show he recognized the supremacy of Congress in the American government.

During his tenure as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army during the American Revolutionary War, George Washington had many opportunities to bolster his own power and authority to go against the wishes of Congress. Washington's experience in the Continental Congress shaped his view that the legislature should have command over the military, views that continued to guide his actions under the United States

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[28] George Washington, "Address to Congress on Resigning His Commission," *George Washington Papers*, Series 3, Subseries 3A, Library of Congress, https://cdn.loc.gov/service/mss/mgw/mgw3a/007/007.pdf.

Constitution as the new Commander-in-Chief of the US military as the first President of the United States.

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Bridging the Gap

George Washington's Impact on Civil Authority over the Military

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Thesis

George Washington's actions before, throughout, and after the American Revolutionary War demonstrate how civil authority over the military was established in the newly formed United States.

Congressional Approval

George Washington was appointed as Commander-in-Chief by the Continental Congress in 1775. From his years in the Virginia legislature and the Continental Congress, Washington learned the importance of civilian supremacy. He understood the strong anti-army tradition of the American colonies, and resolved to make his army completely obedient to Congress, who would later give him overarching power to run the war as he saw fit due his prior obedience in the initial years of the American Revolutionary War.

Acquisitions

As the power to take resources and money was not delegated to Washington, he had to repeatedly ask for Congressional approval to forage for supplies from surrounding homes and farms, even when his soldiers were starving and going unpaid.

Disastrous Obedience

Washington obeyed Congress many times, both before and after they gave him the authority to run the Continental Army as he saw fit. When reporting to the War Council, Washington asked four times to attack the encamped British in Boston and was denied every time, allowing the British to escape the city. After Washington was allowed to run the military as he wanted, Congress wanted him to establish his winter quarters at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777-1778 to protect the Congress as they fled the British invasion of Philadelphia. This caused hunger, sickness, and death among Washington's troops, but he abided by the wishes of Congress.

Mutinies

Washington dealt with the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Line mutinies, where he had to put down armies moving against state legislatures. He also defused the Newburgh Crisis, in which American officers were planning to march on Congress.

Resignation

After the end of the American Revolutionary War, Washington resigned his commission to ensure that he did not accrue too much power.

Conclusion

George Washington's appointment as the Commander-in Chief of the Continental Army during the American Revolutionary War, assisted in the establishment of the American tradition of civilian control of the military.